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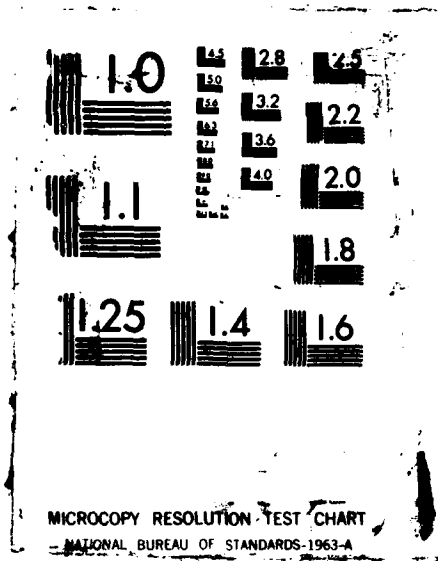
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# AIR WAR COLLEGE

## RESEARCH REPORT

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CENTRAL AMERICA: A STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE

By COLONEL FLORIAN H. YOSTE III

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CENTRAL AMERICA: A STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE

by

Florian H. Yoste, III

Colonel, USAF

A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

IN

FULFILLMENT OF THE RESEARCH REQUIREMENT

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Jim Winkates

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

MARCH 1987



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AIR WAR COLLEGE RESEARCH REPORT ABSTRACT

TITLE: Central America: A Strategic Imperative

AUTHOR: Florian H. Yoste, III, Colonel, USAF

Important U.S. political, economic and military interests converge in Central America and the Caribbean Basin. The stability and security of these areas are therefore essential to U.S. security interests, not only in this region, but worldwide as well.

The countries of Central America are developing countries. They have extensive socioeconomic problems and some countries are politically unstable. In recent years there has been a decline in U.S. involvement and an increased involvement of foreign communist countries, primarily the USSR and Cuba. The conditions in Central America are favorable for revolution, and with increased communist involvement, the expansion of communism onto the mainland of the Western Hemisphere is highly probable.

This study examines these problems and makes specific recommendations to curb communist expansion, stabilize the area, and improve relations between the United States and the countries of Central America.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Colonel Florian H. Yoste, III entered the U.S. Air Force in 1966 and has served in special operations and intelligence assignments at squadron, wing, MAJCOM, and Air Staff levels. He has had assignments in Southeast Asia and Europe, and has also served a tour of duty as Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for European and NATO Policy, Washington, D.C. Colonel Yoste holds a B.A. from the University of Mississippi, Mississippi, and an M.A. from Troy State University, Alabama. He is graduate of the USAF Squadron Officers School, the Air Command and Staff College, and the Air War College, Class of 1987.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

"Our task is to help our neighbors address their underlying problems, while countering and ultimately reversing Soviet and Cuban expansion. U.S. policy supports the growth of democratic institutions, economic development, the achievement of regional solutions to problems through diplomatic negotiations, and the enhancement of security assistance so that the democratic and democratically inclined nations of this area can help themselves to survive. Without the U.S. provided shield, there is little hope of achieving the stability required for the development of democratic institutions..."

Caspar Weinberger  
DOD Report to  
Congress for 1986

What happens to Central America is the paramount strategic question confronting the United States this decade and quite possibly the next. (Appendix I) With vital U.S. economic, political, and military interests converging in Central America, the stability and security of this area are essential to American security interests, not only in the region, but worldwide as well.

(4:1)

American presidents and their closest advisers have known since the United States became a world power that the vital interests in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East could be preserved only if Western Hemispheric nations were on friendly terms with this country and, most

certainly, not allied with communist adversaries. (18:20)

Obviously, no Central American country or insurgent movement in itself is a military threat to the United States. None is capable of jeopardizing U.S. survival or territorial integrity, nor of impeding, to any appreciable degree, a future wartime mission. But the Soviet Union and Cuba together have at least the potential to endanger the U.S. through increased communist involvement. (30:29)

For most of this century a secure southern perimeter has greatly facilitated the U.S. role as a world power. It remains a strategic imperative that the United States prevent threats from arising in Central America that would require the diversion of military and other resources to the detriment of U.S. strength and flexibility elsewhere. (20:v)

The establishment of a communist regime in Cuba in 1961 was a serious and costly setback. But Cuba is an island, and successive American administrations have managed politically to isolate the Castro regime within this hemisphere. The success of the Sandinista revolution in 1979 is a far more serious reversal because Nicaragua is situated in the heart of the Central American Isthmus, with direct land access to both Honduras and Costa Rica. (18:20)

If present trends continue, by the end of this century, the Soviet Union, not the United States, could possibly be the predominant military power in the Central American region. This eventuality would be a fundamental political reversal in the Western Hemisphere. A "domino effect" could then occur in which the Soviets and their supporters not only would be in a position to threaten Mexico and Panama, but also could undermine friendly governments in the Caribbean and South America. (18:20)

Current U.S. policy in the Central American region has sought to create conditions conducive to diplomatic solutions which will serve U.S. security interests, as well as those of its Latin American allies. There has been an encouraging move toward democracy in the region, but, at the same time, in countries like El Salvador and Guatemala, terrorist/insurgent groups are growing in number and boldness, and they may threaten the new democracies.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight prevailing social, economic, and political conditions in the Central American region and show (1) how existing circumstances have produced an environment conducive to revolution and (2) that communist ideology will be a significant factor in any revolution and post-revolutionary government.

Specific objectives of this paper are to:

- (1) Review significant social, economic, and political conditions in Central America.
- (2) Discuss the legacy of U.S. intervention in the area.
- (3) Show why the United States has important security interests in the region.
- (4) Reveal the many internal and external threats to the Caribbean Basin.
- (5) Outline how communist involvement is spreading throughout the region.
- (6) Highlight a new threat element in the area: Low Intensity Conflict (LIC).
- (7) Relate the prospects and contributions of the Contadora Peace Process to peaceful settlement.
- (8) Conclude with recommendations of future U.S. actions to assist the area to repress the spread of communism, and ultimately to achieve U.S. goals in the region.

## CHAPTER II

### A LEGACY OF U.S. INTERVENTION

Latins react with suspicion, if not bemused hostility, when Yankees say they are trying to save them from communism. A look at America's record in the region offers a clue to their doubts. (24:36)

Over a period of nearly 150 years, U.S. Armed Forces swept into Central America and the Caribbean more than 60 times to topple governments, install friendly regimes, aid or suppress revolutions and support American business interests. (24:36)

The hazard that this record poses for the administration today is summed up by an Hispanic member of the bipartisan National Commission on Central America chaired by Henry Kissinger. San Antonio Mayor Henry Cisneros warned that with its growing military presence, America is in danger of "continuing a history by which we lose the people." Even Reagan's friend, Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado, recently cautioned him about "shows of force which threaten to touch off a conflagration." (24:36)

Today, President Reagan faces a formidable challenge if he hopes to overcome the legacy of suspicion concerning Washington's motives in Central America. That legacy stems from a series of American doctrines of the

19th and 20th centuries that established Latin America generally as a kind of United States protectorate.

(24:36)

Increasingly through the late 19th century and into the 20th century, Central America fell under the shadow of the growing power of the United States. It was the site of the strategic Panama Canal, completed in 1914, and a target for increased U.S. business investments. Both factors gave the United States an interest in the region's political stability. But stability proved hard to attain because of repeated civil wars, boundary wars, and unpaid foreign debts. (2:298)

In his important study, Interventions and Dollar Diplomacy in the Caribbean, 1900-1921, Dana G. Munro concludes:

"As we look back on the story it seems clear that the motives that inspired U.S. policy were basically political rather than economic. What the U.S. was trying to do, throughout the period ... was to put an end to conditions that threatened the independence of some of the Caribbean states and were consequently a potential danger to the security of the U.S. Revolutions must be discouraged; the bad financial practices that weakened the governments and involved them in trouble with foreigners must be reformed; and general economic and social conditions, which were a basic cause of instability, must be improved."  
(39:9)

It was during this period that the term "gunboat diplomacy" entered the language to describe U.S. policies in the area. In 1904, Roosevelt, who advised the nation to "speak softly and carry a big stick," propounded the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, asserting the right to send U.S. Armed Forces to collect foreign debts owed by any country of the hemisphere. Acting on this principle, Washington, during the succeeding quarter century, sent its military forces repeatedly into the countries of Central America when instability threatened U.S. interests. (2:298)

In Central America, the "big stick" fell most heavily on turbulent and debt-ridden Nicaragua. There, the Marines landed in 1912 at the request of a pro-U.S. government. (2:298) At that time, Nicaragua was in a state of near anarchy, the government was bankrupt and foreign creditors were threatening intervention. The conservatives appealed to Washington to intervene while New York bankers bought foreign bonds and installed economic supervisors to manage the Nicaraguan economy and insure repayment of their investments. This situation brought a liberal revolt which led to the landing of the U.S. Marines to restore order. The Marines became involved in a twenty-year war for the elimination of banditry and the establishment of a stable, democratic



government. (6:80) Unfortunately, the new stability was temporary. In the mid-1920's a populist and nationalist force under General Augusto Cesar Sandino launched a guerrilla war against the regime. In 1933, with the Marines gone at last, Sandino made peace with the government, receiving a grant of amnesty and land for his followers. A year later, Sandino was shot by members of the national guard on the direct orders, many authorities believe, of then Minister of War and later dictator and friend of the United States, General Anastasio Somoza. (2:289)

It is against this background that Latins are debating America's motives now that the U.S. again is flexing its military muscle in the face of Marxist-guerrilla challenges. "Many Central Americans are worried about the Cubans and Nicaraguans," says Latin American scholar Robert Leiken. He observes further, "But they're also alarmed about our sending down the fleet. It smells a lot like the old gunboat diplomacy." (24:39)

## CHAPTER III

### U.S. SECURITY INTERESTS IN THE REGION

Security interests of the United States focus principally on the strategic balance of power between itself and the Soviet Union.(21:136) This concern has inadvertently obscured the importance of America's geographic backyard, Central America. It seems that the Central American countries are largely taken for granted except when developments or problems in the area, such as the 1962 Cuban missile crises or the El Salvador insurgency, create heightened concern. Dr. Jorge Dominguez of Harvard notes, "U.S. attention to these small Southern neighbors has been marked repeatedly by periods of neglect followed by periods of panic...." (14:1)

Just how important are U.S. security interests in Central America? From a strategic viewpoint, they seem important because Central America is part of the U.S. strategic rear area, the Caribbean Basin (Appendix II), because the Soviet Union and Soviet bloc countries are seeking targets of opportunity there (Appendix III), and because regional trends may ultimately erode the strategic position of the United States. This does not mean that U.S. global credibility ought to be seen as a key stake in what promises to be a long struggle in the

region. But it does mean that U.S. security depends heavily on preventing the consolidation of hostile regimes in Central America. (20:v)

U.S. interests in Central America appear to fall under broad political, economic, and military categories.

#### Political

There are so many who support political extremes, particularly in Central America, that U.S. policy will certainly be criticized by some regardless of its content.

No U.S. government can reject policies that encourage working with the nations of the hemisphere toward more open, pluralistic systems based on consent. The American people have confirmed the democratic form of government as their aspiration, whenever their consent has been sought. (34:12)

These interests imply a strong U.S. commitment to deter/defend against hostile threats from external powers such as the Soviet Union, as well as "...supporting institutions and practices within other countries that will allow liberty to flourish." (14:18) Ambassador Thomas O. Enders, former Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, on a number of occasions has stated that United States/Caribbean Basin foreign policy objectives are the security of the region and countries

therein, support for and promotion of democracy, as well as economic development and growth. (15:11)

Certainly, one of the greatest tasks for the U.S. government is precisely how to energize the North American people again to renew the commitment to the people of this hemisphere without succumbing to a new era of interventionism. (34:12)

#### Economic

The U.S. economic interest in the region is small. Much of this discussion related to the "defenses of U.S. interests" in this region has centered on the tangible "interests" of foreign investments, resources, trade, and the property and rights of U.S. citizens. (34:12-13)

An analysis of the economies of the countries as a whole show:

(1) The GNP and associated growth rates are typical for small developing countries. (Appendix IV) However, social discontent in the form of strikes, terrorist activities or insurgencies disrupt and often set back economic growth.

(2) All the countries imported more than they exported.

(3) The external debt is not a significant economic problem for the countries of Central America. However, if development is accelerated, external debt will

increase. The condition of most Central American economies can best be described as "getting better," but fragile. Economic conditions will remain stable and grow only if no crises (crop failure, insurgencies, etc.) occurs. (27:6-7)

The average annual per capita income (Appendix VI) for Central American countries is slightly above that of most developing nations. However, the distribution of income is highly skewed. The per capita income among rural workers is 1/3 the per capita income in El Salvador and Costa Rica. (27:7)

It can be said that exports have grown in recent years, with the U.S. accounting for most of the products shipped abroad. (Appendix VII) Even though the U.S. is the primary exporting partner, Central American products account for less than 2% of total U.S. imports. (27:7)

Today, U.S. economic interests in Central America are minimal. Yet, in contrast to the relatively small U.S. economic interest, the Caribbean Basin as a whole is economically significant. These economic interests are important since they mesh with political and security interests involved in the relationship with Mexico. The conceptual problem is to determine how to relate larger economic interests to broader developments in Central America. (34:14)

## Military

Our primary security objective in the Western Hemisphere is to maintain the security of the North American continent. (33:131) This statement concisely states the key U.S. military interest in the Caribbean Basin which is to secure the region from hostile threats.

Two-thirds of all U.S. foreign trade and petroleum pass through the Panama Canal and Caribbean, and approximately half of U.S. reinforcements to NATO are staged through the Caribbean. Soviet naval and air forces operating from bases in Cuba and Nicaragua effectively could harass U.S. reinforcement efforts, and Soviet surface and submarine fleets could close major choke points in the region's sea lanes. To counter this potential interdiction threat, the United States would have to divert forces now programmed for Europe. (4:2) The security of maritime operations in the Caribbean, therefore, is essential to the security of the Atlantic Alliance and U.S. vital interests in the Middle East. (42:42)

If Cuba and Nicaragua remain unchallenged, the Southern Flank is clearly vulnerable. The United States must insure that its military activities in the region not only meet peacetime objectives, but also assure wartime readiness. It should not forget that in one

8-month period during World War II, from December 7, 1941, to July 31, 1942, an average of three German U-Boats on patrol sank 322 U.S. merchant vessels in the Western Atlantic, Caribbean, and the Gulf of Mexico.

(42:42)

## CHAPTER IV

### THREATS TO THE CARIBBEAN BASIN

In the course of the last 25 years, the Soviet Union has moved from a marginal presence and little influence, to a major actor with multifaceted activities throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. (10:1)

In 1960, the Soviet Union had diplomatic relations with only five countries in the region and few significant overt relationships aside from ties to local communist parties. Today, the Soviet Union has diplomatic relations with 16 countries, and its hemispheric proxy Cuba constitutes a complex military threat to the region. (10:1)

The goal of communism is to spread its form of government throughout the world. The economic, social, and political conditions of Central America make this area an inviting stepping stone for the spread of communism. Presently, there are three factions actively promoting the spread of communism outside their borders: China, the USSR, and Cuba. Of the three, only China is not active in Central America today. (3:2)

#### Violent Revolution

There is a real threat of communism to the countries of Central America. The growth of communism can take one of two paths - either a violent revolution or working



within established political frameworks. Both forms are a potential threat to the countries of Central America. Communism working within established political frameworks is a threat to the more stable governments of Costa Rica and Panama. Both countries have elected governments and the highest standards of living in the area. Costa Rica has the largest communist party and both countries have a large number of communist sympathizers. Additionally, the governments of both countries allow the communist parties to operate in the open. To date, the communist party appears to be at bay in Costa Rica. But in Panama, the environment is more conducive for the communists to work for control within the political framework. But in either country, the governments do not have to be as concerned with violent revolution as other Central American countries. (27:36)

Conditions in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras are conducive to revolution and a communist takeover. These three countries have the lowest average per capita income and the highest population growth rates (along with Nicaragua) in Central America. Additionally, they have the largest inequality in land distribution, the largest percent of the work force dependent on agriculture, and are the only countries that fail to meet the recommended daily caloric intake. Government

repression, as well as left-wing and right-wing terrorism, are almost daily occurrences in Guatemala and El Salvador. There is little argument that conditions in these countries are conducive to revolution. (27:36)

These conditions are not new to these countries and one may wonder why a communist inspired revolution has not occurred earlier and why the threat of spreading communism is greater today. Given these conditions, the fundamental question must be asked; what might spur domestic revolution? Surely there are three factors; (1) continued inequities between the rich and the poor, (2) governmental inspired "incidents," and (3) the continuing possibility of external intervention. (27:37)

Various policies have been tried in the past without significant changes for the poor. While communism may not give the peasant what he wants most--ownership of sufficient land to earn a decent living--it does promise more than he has now. Considering existing conditions, the peasant must conclude that a new government cannot be as bad as the present. The current situations in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras fit the thoughts of Alexis de Tocqueville on revolution: "Evils which are patiently endured when they seem inevitable become intolerable once the idea of escape from them is suggested." (7:79)

## USSR

Over the last three to five years, the Soviet Union has sought to exploit this "boiling cauldron in Central America" by providing more military assistance to Cuba and Nicaragua than the United States has provided to all of Latin America. The Sandinista military buildup began in 1980, two years before there was any significant armed opposition to the Managua regime. From July, 1979, through April, 1981, the United States provided generous economic assistance to Nicaragua (\$118 million) but contributed only small amounts of military assistance to Nicaragua's neighbors. Subsequent increases in U.S. military assistance to these neighboring countries have been a direct reaction to the military buildup and support for guerrillas undertaken by the Soviet bloc.

(8:1)

The Soviets have long described the Caribbean as the "strategic rear" of the United States, but have lamented the "geographic fatalism" they felt rendered them incapable of sustaining pressure on their adversary's potential "Achilles' heel." (5:284-286) Over the last quarter century, however, the Soviets have sought to exploit the vulnerabilities of the region in the name of "anti-imperialist" revolution. Soviet leaders see in Central America an excellent opportunity to preoccupy the

United States, the "main adversary" of Soviet strategy, thus gaining for themselves greater global freedom of action. (11:3)

Although the Soviet Union's political interests in the region are still primarily served by Cuba, the series of agreements between the USSR and Nicaragua in March, 1980, for economic, technical, scientific, and cultural cooperation, demonstrate clearly that the Soviets are willing to become more involved in the area. (30:101) They have maintained a low profile, but are perceived often as an attractive sponsor. Although it appears contradictory, they are not usually critical of repressive regimes (40:335) , but, at the same time, they are considered by themselves and others as a natural ally to Third World revolutionary movements. (30:106)

While Moscow is not likely to mount a direct military challenge to the United States in the Caribbean Basin, it is attempting to foment as much unrest as possible in an area that is the strategic crossroads of the Western Hemisphere. (11:3-4)

The Soviet Union, with and through its Cuban proxy, is outspending the United States in the Caribbean Basin region five to one. (Appendix VIII) Even though the burden of supporting Cuba is high, the Soviet Union has judged the political, strategic, and potential military

benefits of maintaining a beachhead in the Western Hemisphere to be worth the economic costs. Ideology plays an important role in Soviet motivations, as the creation of additional communist states validates the tenets of Marxism-Leninism and bolsters the Soviet Union itself. Kremlin leaders hope that ultimately the United States could become so concerned with turmoil in the Central American and Caribbean region that it would be less able militarily and politically to oppose Soviet initiatives in other key areas of the world. (5:3)

#### Cuba

The seizure of power by Fidel Castro ushered in a new era in the Caribbean Basin. While most dictators had been content with internal control, Castro soon exported his own revolutionary methods. The anti-U.S. direction of the Castro regime was established at the outset. In the Spring of 1959, Castro visited the United States, but forbade his economic advisers to talk of foreign aid with Washington, a subject the United States was ready to discuss. (11:7) Castro, however, was soon discussing such aid with Moscow, carefully nurturing the myth that U.S. hostility had forced him to turn to the Soviets for help. In December, 1961, Castro delivered a speech declaring that he had hidden his true political colors during the struggle against Batista and that he was Marxist-Leninist

and would be one until the day he died. (43:1373) As recently as January, 1984, Castro admitted that the U.S. response to his activities played little part in his embrace of communism, adding that "inexorably, we considered ourselves Marxist-Leninist." (19:4)

Castro's turn toward Moscow gave him an international fame greater than he would have had as a mere Cuban leader and a Latin American revolutionary. As one observer of Castro has commented:

"It is, after all, the capacity of the Soviets to give Castro a role on the larger stage of world politics that appeals to him and allows him to pursue what otherwise would necessarily be a more inward looking, and for that reason more constructive, form of Cuban nationalism." (16:39)

Cuba is now the cornerstone of the Soviet policy of support for insurgency and the destabilization of democratic nations in the Caribbean Basin. The Soviets have built the island into a heavily armed military outpost, and they singlehandedly keep the island's failing economy afloat, to the tune of approximately 10-12 million dollars a day. (10:2)

Cuba is perceived by the USSR as a major military asset. Like their Soviet patron, the Cubans have been able to build an impressive military establishment, but continue to have problems running their troubled economy. (10:2)

## The Soviet-Cuban Connection

From Cuba's standpoint, its strategic relationship with the Soviet Union had its genesis in Castro's assessment that his foreign policy would alienate the United States, thereby requiring a powerful ally. Castro believed that an alliance with Moscow could lessen Cuba's risk. For Cuba, the Soviet Union was to be a guarantor behind whose protection Havana felt secure in pursuing the radical transformation of Cuban society. From the outset, Moscow was a vital source of economic aid and subsidies, without which Cuba could not have taken the course it did. For Moscow, Cuba represented an opportunity to introduce Soviet power and influence into the Western Hemisphere and to cause the United States to address itself more than in the recent past to the security of its own region. This relationship between Moscow and Havana also substantially increased the likelihood that future revolutions in the region would take on East-West dimensions, whatever their costs. Each side thus perceived advantages occurring from the Soviet-Cuban connection. Cuba had a big brother to protect it, and the Soviet Union had another opportunity to alter the strategic balance. (11:8-9)

Under Soviet tutelage, Cuba's armed forces have expanded steadily. More than 60,000 tons of Soviet arms

were delivered to Cuba in both 1981 and 1982 (the highest levels since the 1962 missile crisis). The 1983 and 1984 shipments were only slightly lower at 51,000 and 56,000 respectively. (10:2)

Soviet arms deliveries have made Cuba's Armed Forces the best equipped in Latin America. (10:2) They now include 160,000 active duty military personnel, plus up to 135,000 well trained and experienced reservists who can be mobilized in two or three days. This total force exceeds that of the active duty forces of Brazil, a country with 13 times Cuba's population. (12:6) In addition to a large standing army, the Cubans operate more than 950 tanks and more than 200 jet fighters, some of them MiG-23's. The Cuban Navy, already equipped with frigates, diesel submarines, missile and torpedo-equipped patrol boats, has already added two amphibious landing ships. (10:2)

Access to Cuba provides invaluable benefits for the Kremlin's global strategy. The Soviets have stationed at least 7,700 military and intelligence personnel in Cuba. They have a 2,800-man military advisory group to train and help maintain the huge Cuban military machine. (11:10) The Soviets have constructed a major intelligence gathering facility operated by 2,100 Soviet technicians at Lourdes, near Havana. These technicians



are part of the approximately 7,700 Soviet advisers. This electronic facility monitors a wide range of U.S. civilian and military communications, and it is the most sophisticated such Soviet facility outside the territory of the USSR. Periodic Soviet air deployments stage from Cuba. Naval visits are also part of the Soviet Caribbean presence, Soviet Navy task forces having deployed 24 times to the Caribbean since 1969. (10:2)

Should Soviet leaders decide in the future to pursue a more direct and active role in the Western Hemisphere, Cuban ports and air bases (constructed over the years with Soviet funding and technical advice) would serve as excellent platforms for projecting Soviet military power. As yet however, the Soviets have never directly deployed their forces in the region. (11:13)

It appears the close relationship between Cuba and the Soviet Union will continue even if Cuba steps up its revolutionary efforts in the Western Hemisphere. Although Cuba is apparently trying to expand its influence through diplomacy, its participation in Africa, with Soviet support and possibly at Soviet direction, points to a return to the use of force in popular movements. With this continued Soviet support, Cuba will be able to continue its revolutionary efforts in Central America. (27:28)

## CHAPTER V

### EXPANDING COMMUNIST INVOLVEMENT IN CENTRAL AMERICA

The countries of Central America and the Caribbean struggling to defend pluralistic political systems are confronted with Soviet-backed guerrilla movements attempting to seize power. The Soviet Union's interest in Central America and the Caribbean was indicated in a 10 March 1983 "Memorandum of Conversation" between Grenadian Army Chief of Staff Einstein Louison and the Soviet Army Chief of General Staff Marshal Nikolai V. Ogarkov. The Soviet military leader was quoted as saying, "Over two decades ago, there was only Cuba in Latin America. Today there are Nicaragua, Grenada, and a serious battle is going on in El Salvador." (12:4)

Since World War II, the USSR has directly, or through its proxies, pursued an opportunistic policy of expanding its influence and reducing that of its rivals in the Third World. "Such opportunities have characteristically been exercised when the United States is judged to be uncertainly committed, i.e., reluctant or unable to oppose the USSR." (26) Captured selected documents and corroborative intelligence reports further demonstrate that the Soviets and Cubans siezed upon indigenous unrest in Central America in the late 1970's and early 1980's. Then, as in the case of El Salvador,

they provided direction, arms, and assistance at unifying the rebel forces seeking to overthrow existing governments. (9:2-5)

Cuba and the Soviet Union viewed the Sandinista victory as the first real opportunity in 20 years to undermine the foundations of U.S. policy in Central America. The establishment of another Marxist state in the Caribbean and the potential internationalization of the conflict in that region forced the United States to reassess its traditional North-South Latin American strategy (hemisphere security) and consider the situation within an East-West framework (continental defense). (36:2)

The Sandinistas wasted little time in establishing a close affiliation with the Soviet Union. Formal ties were also developed between Nicaragua and other communist states. Major quantities of Soviet military hardware were shipped to Nicaragua, pilots were trained in Eastern Europe and the Soviet bloc, and Cuban technical and military advisers were sent to Nicaragua in large numbers. (13:191) The primary reason for these ties remains to be seen.

An estimate of Soviet objectives in Central America is helpful in understanding Soviet involvement. They are seeking to take advantage of unrest and growing

anti-Americanism, but they do not create these conditions. (29:164) They do not have the capability for this and have elected to emphasize the advancement of communism in Central America by working within the established political framework. The Soviets believe that communist party support of nationalists and leftist-leaning politicians will eventually lead to communist client states. The Soviet approach conflicts with the Cuban position of insurgency and the violent overthrow of non-communist governments in Central America.

Moscow has delegated to a very willing Castro the task of training the majority of Central American guerrillas and saboteurs to carry out the Soviet-Cuban strategy. Training camps in Cuba provide foreigners intensive military instruction in small unit tactics, demolition, and other elements of guerrilla warfare, as well as Marxist-Leninist political indoctrination. Cuba's ability to create chaos in Central America has been increased dramatically by the coming to power in 1979 in Nicaragua of Castro's longtime proteges, the Sandinistas. For the first time, a government led by Marxists-Leninists became entrenched in Central America. (11:13)

Today, Cuba is regaining its influence in Central America. Costa Rica, Panama, and Nicaragua now have diplomatic relations with Cuba. However, the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are still very wary of communism and Cuba. Their fears are probably justified. Cuba's role and support of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua is well-documented. Cuban advisers remain in Nicaragua and have been reported in other Central American countries. Additionally, Cuba's efforts in the Caribbean island of Grenada did not go unnoticed by concerned Central American governments.

Foreign communist involvement in Central America from the Soviet Union and Cuba is expected to continue. Both will use diplomatic avenues to advance the spread of communism; however, Cuba will continue to support insurrection when it feels it can be fostered. The success of communism in Central America could be curtailed significantly with the involvement of the United States.

## CHAPTER VI

### LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT

Recently, military publications have contained much discussion and analysis of Low-Intensity Conflict (LIC). Simultaneously, many Department of Defense initiatives have been undertaken to improve the U.S. ability to wage war at the low-intensity levels, the newest threat affecting the region. Yet, the true meaning of LIC remains elusive, and the discussions of LIC vary. LIC is currently defined as:

"... a limited politico-military struggle to achieve political, social, economic or psychological objectives. It is often protracted and ranges from diplomatic, economic, and psycho-social pressures through terrorism and insurgency. It is generally confined to a geographic area and is often characterized by constraints on the weaponry, tactics, and level of violence." (43:2)

When applying this definition of LIC to Central America, many military strategists tend to view the situation as being a communist insurgency. Therefore, the normal response is to initiate a series of operational techniques that will eliminate the threat. It is believed by many contemporary military thinkers that the use of technologically superior weapons are not the total solution in insurgency problems. (28:10)

Clausewitz has described war as "a remarkable trinity" composed of political objectives, of operational

instruments and of popular passion. (23:85) It is in this context that LIC in Central America must be fought. The social-political environment, not hostile armed forces, is the main battle area. This is the battle zone where victory or defeat will occur. (28:10)

Tensions in the Third World have been on the rise regarding both internal wars and conflicts between nations. For example, during the period 1945-77, there were no fewer than 56 conflicts involving a significant part of at least one state. In 1983, some 40 to 45 nations were at war in one form or another. (33:248) In short, the United States, in all likelihood, will become increasingly preoccupied with LIC and, by necessity, will be forced to divert some of its attention from Europe. (38:5)

Today in Central America, the old ruling triad of landowners, church, and military has begun to splinter. Elements within the church have become outspoken proponents of political and economic reforms. Social, economic, and political issues are not the only causes of disorder and political disintegration in Central America. As was alluded to earlier, Cuba and the Soviet Union have been active in exploiting the existing conditions of social and economic disorder. (28:5)

The most prevalent tactics of disruption are bombings, kidnappings, assassinations, small-scale raids, bank robberies, and other violent actions. These activities provide basic financial support for insurgent and vigilante groups. They lend themselves to exploitation through propaganda and they can be affected using a minimum amount of resources and personnel. Even the most nominally democratic government is, at the same time, vulnerable to these particular methods and hard pressed to respond with requirements to counter them. (28:6)

It is important for U.S. policy-makers to be aware of this Central American legacy as they prepare policies, strategy, and programs to deal with the current crisis in Central America. Without a true understanding of LIC and the root causes , the policy-makers cannot be expected to formulate a cohesive strategy. (28:6)

In the final analysis, the most likely form of conflict in the region, now and in the future, will take the form of LIC. Further, multiple brushfire wars directly play into the Soviet hand, and can diminish greatly U.S. efforts toward regional stability as well as draw down U.S. resources in combatting threats.

Civilian policymakers and senior military officers will have to decide when military force is required to



protect U.S. national interests. They must also decide how that force should be most effectively used and where U.S. military troops should fight if blood must be shed. As in the past, such decisions will not be easy. (38:11)

## CHAPTER VII

### THE CONTADORA PEACE PROCESS

The Contadora Peace Process led by Mexico, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Panama, and Colombia remains the major hope for a negotiated settlement of international tensions in Central America. These five nations came together originally on the Panamanian island of Contadora in January, 1983, to launch a diplomatic initiative designed to forestall direct U.S. military intervention in the region. By the end of the year, they had convinced the five Central American nations to sign a "Document of Objectives" specifying in principle the elements to be included in a regional peace treaty. (32:4) In the Document, the participants committed themselves to an agreed set of objectives, including political, economic, and security concerns to be reflected in a comprehensive treaty. (11:67)

The most important points were: a prohibition on support for insurgencies against neighboring countries; a prohibition on foreign military bases; a phased reduction of foreign military advisers; limits on conventional military forces; and, the need for national reconciliation among conflicting political groups within each nation. (32:40)

Contadora's objectives are compatible with U.S. policy toward Nicaragua, which calls for ending the arms buildup; removing Soviet, Cuban, and other foreign military personnel; ending Sandinista support for the insurgency in El Salvador and other countries; and, promoting political pluralism in accordance with the Sandinista promises made to the Organization of American States (OAS) at the time of the Revolution in 1979. The Contadora process is intended to bring a peaceful solution to the turmoil in Central America by creating a forum for meaningful negotiation among all the parties. Despite lip service to the democratization aspects of Contadora, the Sandinistas have demonstrated by their actions that they are opposed to any internal changes that would lessen their control of political life in Nicaragua. (11:67)

It is also clear that Nicaragua has used the Contadora group, in the words of President Arias of Costa Rica, "for its international propaganda value."

Commenting further on the 5-7 April Contadora peace talks, Arias wrote on 9 April 1986:

"In Panama the true situation was made very clear. Twelve Latin American Foreign Ministers, among them the Foreign Ministers of the Central American countries, supported the prompt signing of the Contadora Act in accordance with international opinion. Only

Nicaragua was opposed, thus demonstrating once again that it has neither a true interest in, or the will for, peace in Central America. (1:1)

The United States has encouraged direct dialogue between the Sandinistas and the democratic resistance and internal opposition. To date, the Sandinistas have repeatedly rejected any such discussion, although they have demanded negotiations with the United States. The United States Government, however, does not believe it has the right to decide unilaterally the fate of the Nicaraguan people. The Sandinistas' refusal to talk with their opposition stands in sharp contrast to President Duarte's repeated openings to the insurgents in El Salvador. (11:67-68)

The United States has a strong interest in encouraging the nations of Central America to assume greater responsibility for regional arrangements. Involvement will be more acceptable if the U.S. reflects a regional consensus. Thus, a key objective for the United States should be to promote the development of an independent system of regional relations, backed up by commitments of U.S. economic resources, diplomatic support, and military assistance. In the final analysis, for a regional arrangement to be lasting, it must elicit the cooperation and good will of the sister republics in the South. (41:48) In rebuilding its leadership role,

the U.S. should not seek to reassert its former hegemony. It needs to engage the governments in Central America and throughout the Caribbean Basin in developing collective responsibility for regional security and development. Subregional mechanisms such as the Contadora Group and the Central American Common Market provide better frameworks for coalition-building than does the OAS, which is currently too weak and too divided to serve this purpose well. (20:29)

The Reagan administration should understand that the internal and external sources of conflict in Central America are inseparable. The divisive public debate, with some people blaming the revolutionary violence on local poverty and inequity and others blaming it on Soviet-Cuban subversion, is misleading and should be set aside. The best way for U.S. policy to rise above this debate in this country and to affect political behavior in Central America is to address both sources of conflict. (20:29-30)

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The nature of the U.S. relationship with countries of the Central American region requires that U.S. policies or actions in the region be negotiated rather than imposed. U.S. interests which must be protected primarily concern the sea lanes, military facilities, and continuing economic relationships. Nevertheless, the turmoil in the region has become sufficiently important to threaten the credibility of U.S. political leadership globally, and therefore demands attention. The U.S. should continue to promote democratic values, but the leftist threat must be contained before that can be done effectively. If the United States ignores or exploits the countries of Central America, it will not be able to keep the area free from outside influence or to remain on friendly terms with the governments of these countries.

United States policy in the area is based on four mutually supportive elements that are being pursued simultaneously: democracy, economic development, diplomacy, and defense. (11:1)

#### Democracy

Furtherance of democracy is central to U.S. policy in the region, for the United States believes that

governments that evolve from the ballot box are not only respectful of the rights of the citizens, but also of the rights of neighboring countries. Since 1981, there have been more elections in Central America than in any five-year period in the area's history. (11:1) Democracy is now emerging as the rule, not the exception. Only in Nicaragua did people go to the polls with no real choice, due to Sandinista harassment of the democratic opposition. (12:1) This fact clearly demonstrates that the people of the region wish to select their own leaders, rather than have them imposed by extremists of the left or the right. Democracy, however, is not an end; it is a fragile process that requires careful nurturing and constant attention. Democracy seeks to give political power to the people and their representatives, not solely to the elites of the political extremes. (11:2)

To obtain broad-based support within the United States and in Central America, U.S. policy must do more than simply oppose left and right wing extremism. It must also strengthen moderate elites and institutions--both civilian and military--that share American values and prefer democratic solutions for the long run. (20:31)

The United States is the only nation that combines the interests, influence, and resources to shield moderate forces. The European nations and the Contadora nations cannot offer adequate protection. Ultimately, if right-wing extremists continue to murder moderate political opponents, it may be necessary to take punitive measures against right-wing leaders. (20:32)

#### Economic Development

The region's long-term problems are largely socio-economic, and so must be the solutions. (19:32) Economic development is essential for the elimination of poverty and social violence and subversion. U.S. development policy has been and is continuing to be aimed at bettering the lives of the people of the region and replacing frustration with hope. For this reason, almost 75 cents of every dollar in U.S. aid that has gone to the countries of Central America has been for economic assistance. (11:2) (Appendix IX) The goal of the United States will be to continue to help these countries achieve self-sustaining economic growth to enable them to provide jobs and increased opportunities for their citizens. (11:2)

#### Diplomacy

Diplomacy recognizes that dialogue can be a prelude to peace and that words are preferable to bullets. But



the words must be followed by actions tied to a genuine, lasting peace, not a transient truce that masks continued aggression. A regional peaceful solution can best be attained through the Contadora process, and internally by dialogue between governments and the insurgent movements in their countries. Meaningful dialogue could lead insurgent groups to lay down their weapons and compete safely and fairly within a democratically based political process. (11:2)

#### Defense

Currently, there is no immediate need to have U.S. military forces engaged in direct combat with opposition forces in Central America. However, the United States must maintain the capability to deploy troops quickly if the threat intensifies. (28:18)

The U.S. military should continue to participate in military exercises in the Central American region. Emphasis should be placed on combined operations with the host nation. It is important that the U.S. military maintain a highly visible presence in the region. All nations of Central America must perceive that the United States is strong in its resolve to provide assistance when and where needed. It is essential to the security of the region that all nations conclude that the U.S.

commitment to regional stability is real and that the U.S. will not shirk its responsibilities. (28:19)

In the final analysis, U.S. military aid is necessary to provide the countries of the region with the arms and military training to defend themselves. U.S. military assistance is a shield behind which the other elements of our policy are protected. U.S. economic aid alone to these countries will have little impact against guerrillas provided with large quantities of arms and ammunition by Cuba, Nicaragua, and the rest of the communist bloc. (11:2)

#### Nicaraguan Dilemma

The United States does not have any easy options for dealing with the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. In line with initiatives by the Contadora Group, the United States could seek accommodation and cease its diplomatic, political, and economic campaign against the Sandinista regime if the regime would stop assisting guerrillas elsewhere, would not allow Nicaragua to become a platform for Soviet or Cuban expansion, and would not obtain weapons from any source that would upset regional military balances. But the Sandinistas do not have sufficient incentives or external constraints to curtail their revolutionary behavior. They are convinced that public divisions within the United States will undermine

any U.S. effort against them, and that they can obtain assistance from Europe and the Soviet bloc to ensure the survival of their regime. (20:vii)

Should the Sandinistas succeed in consolidating a Soviet-supported Marxist-Leninist regime in Nicaragua, it is unlikely that there can be peace or democracy in Central America. The Sandinistas have developed a police state that is armed by the Soviet Union, trained by Cubans, and kept in power to a great degree by intimidation of the Nicaraguan people. The progress achieved over the past several years in the region will be jeopardized if the Nicaraguan, Cuban, and Soviet-backed aggression against the Central American democracies continues. The Soviet Union has made a large investment, and is hoping for strategic and political return. Cuba remains the key proxy for the Soviets, but the threat to Western Hemisphere stability has been heightened by the addition of Nicaragua to the Soviet camp. The Sandinistas are playing a pivotal role in efforts to expand Soviet influence throughout Central America. (11:68)

Although many options have been discussed and could be employed against the Sandinista government, it appears the best combination would be (1) maintaining pressure on the Sandinistas primarily through non-military means,

including financial support to anti-Sandinista elements and (2) making certain that Soviet weapon systems are not introduced into Nicaragua, resorting, if necessary, to selective U.S. military targeting. (20:ix)

This combination would have to be coupled with other measures to strengthen other Central American nations. Such an approach would provide some flexibility concerning other options that could be adopted later to deal with Nicaragua. (20:ix)

Col. Ralph Novak, International Affairs Specialist, Inter-American Region, OASD/ISA, summed up the future U.S. position in Nicaragua:

" There are many uncertainties ahead in Nicaragua. We are fully aware of them. But we are also aware that there were many uncertainties in El Salvador, in Central America generally, and most recently in Haiti and the Philippines. We were right in El Salvador; Castro, the Soviets, the Libyans, and the Nicaraguan Communists have clearly made their choice. Now it is up to us to make ours." (26)

#### Final Analysis

The countries of Central America and the Caribbean are at a critical juncture. But this could be the impetus for the United States to devote the attention and resources necessary to assist the countries of the

region. As the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America stated:

"Our task now, as a nation, is to transform the crises in Central America into an opportunity. "(41:127)

Throughout this paper, the need for economic growth in the region has been emphasized. Without economic progress, there cannot be long-term stability and regional security. The U.S. simply cannot be successful in fostering stability and democracy in Central America unless it pursues and supports long-term economic objectives.

The U.S. security role of providing military and economic assistance is defined correctly. The legacy of prior direct U.S. involvement still remains on the conscience of many inhabitants of the region. This aid should not be politically conditioned as it has been in the past.

In a serious, conventional confrontation against the U.S.S.R. or Warsaw Pact, it is not unreasonable to assume that Soviet tactics would include severing the Caribbean sea lanes. We not only must plan, but also be prepared for that possibility. Considering the combination of the Nicaraguan buildup and continued Cuban support, the U.S. should continue promoting a regional security force independent of U.S. assistance except for training and

equipment. This would establish a precedent that would prove invaluable in promoting regional cooperation and long-term security.

Through continued dialogue, peace can come to the region. But the words must be followed by actions and tied to a genuine, lasting peace, not a transient truce that marks continued aggression. A regional peaceful solution can best be attained through the Contadora Process, and internally by dialogue between the governments and the insurgent movements in their countries. Meaningful dialogue could lead insurgent groups to lay down their weapons and compete safely and fairly within a democratically based political process.  
(11:2)

"A cornerstone of United States policy is the belief that the best means to assure the failure of communist expansion is the development of democratic institutions, leading to governments that are accountable to the people and not imposed on them by either left or right extremes." (26)

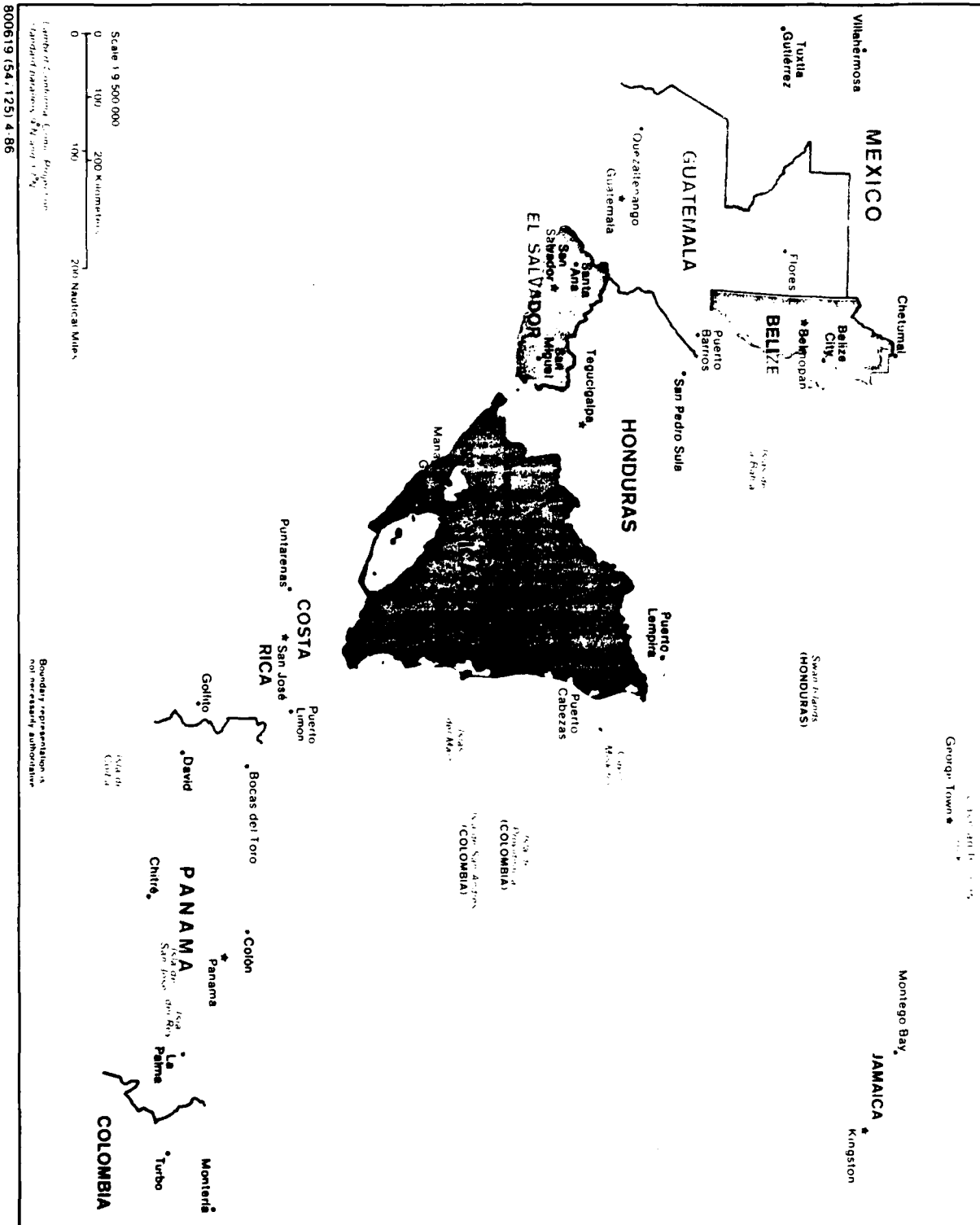
The United States must make the commitment of national will and resources to enable the democratic countries of Central America to continue on the path chosen by their people. In making this commitment, the

United States will blunt the challenge to democracy and enhance its own security. (11:69)

# APPENDIX I

## MAP - CENTRAL AMERICAN COUNTRIES

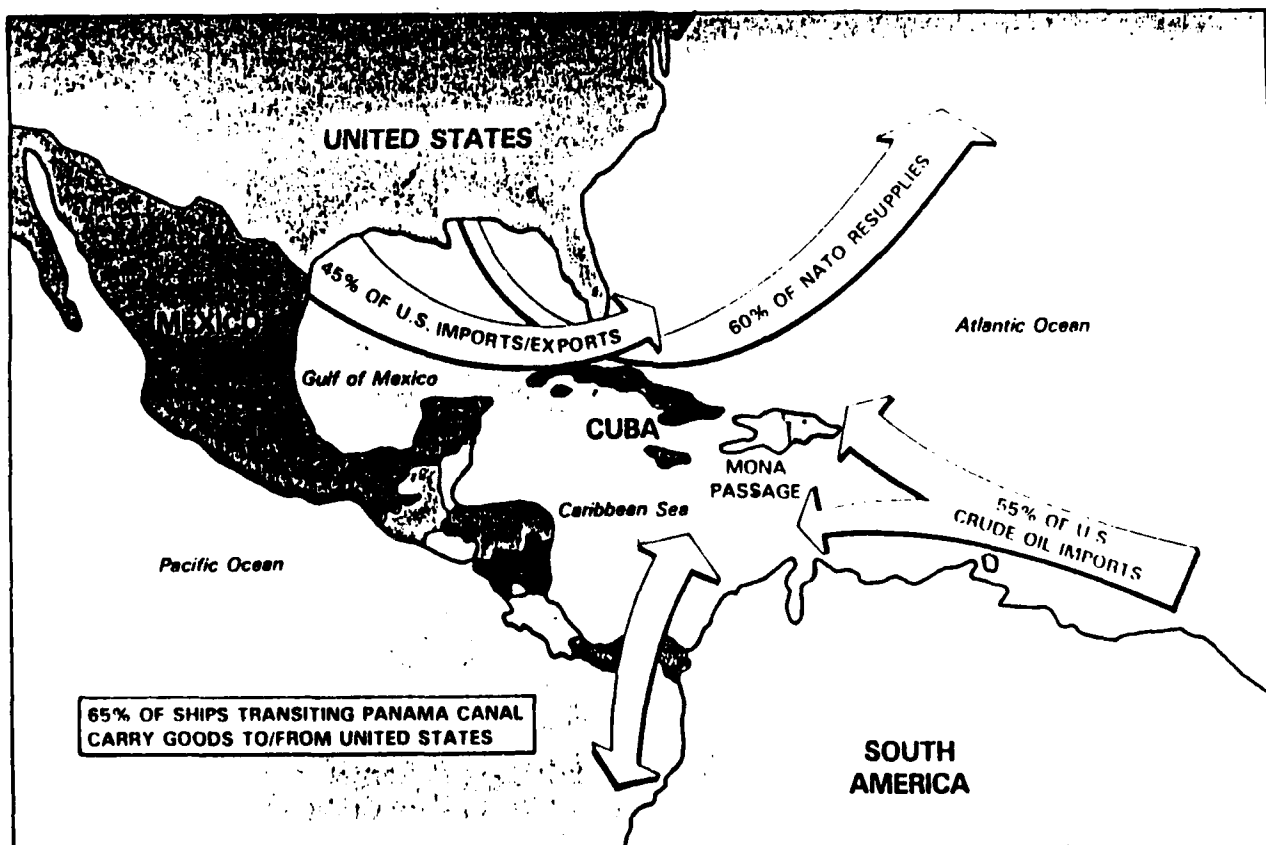
### Central America





APPENDIX II

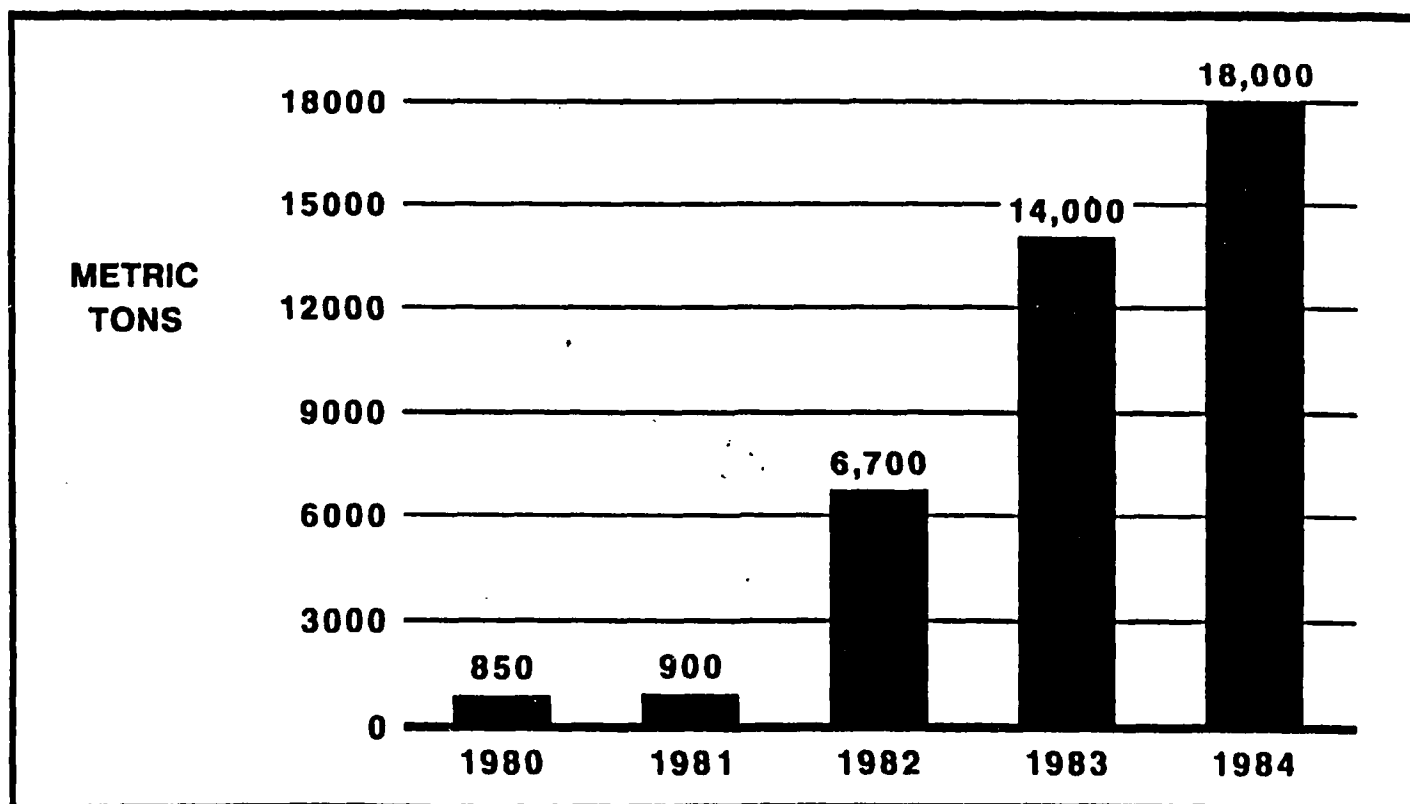
CARIBBEAN SEA LANES



Source: Soviet Activities in Latin America and the Caribbean. Department of State. Washington D.C., 28 February 1985.

APPENDIX III

SOVIET/SOVIET BLOC MILITARY DELIVERIES TO NICARAGUA



Source: Soviet Activities in Latin America and The Caribbean. Department of State. Washington D.C., 28 February 1985.

APPENDIX IV  
GROSS NATIONAL PRODUCT

COUNTRY	GNP(\$Millions)	REAL GROWTH RATE
Costa Rica(1984)	3,400	6%
El Salvador(1983)	75	--
Guatemala(1985)	9,200	1.0%
Honduras(1984)	3,200	2.4%
Nicaragua(1984)	2,900	7.1%
Panama(1984)	4,400	1.0%

Source: The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency,  
Washington, D.C., June 1986.

APPENDIX V  
IMPORTS AND EXPORTS  
(in Millions \$ U.S)

COUNTRY	IMPORTED	EXPORTED
Costa Rica(1984)	1,100	956
El Salvador(1982)	42	17
Guatemala(1984)	1,300	1,100
Honduras(1983)	705	675
Nicaragua(1985)	850	320
Panama(1984)	1,340	419

Source: The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency,  
Washington, D.C., June 1986.

APPENDIX VI  
PER CAPITA INCOME

COUNTRY	PER CAPITA INCOME (\$U.S.)
Costa Rica	1,280 (1984)
El Salvador	420 (1983)
Guatemala	1,150 (1985)
Honduras	750 (1984)
Nicaragua	960 (1985)
Panama	2,159 (1984)

Source: The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency,  
Washington, D.C., June 1986.

## APPENDIX VII

### CENTRAL AMERICAN EXPORTS TO THE U.S.

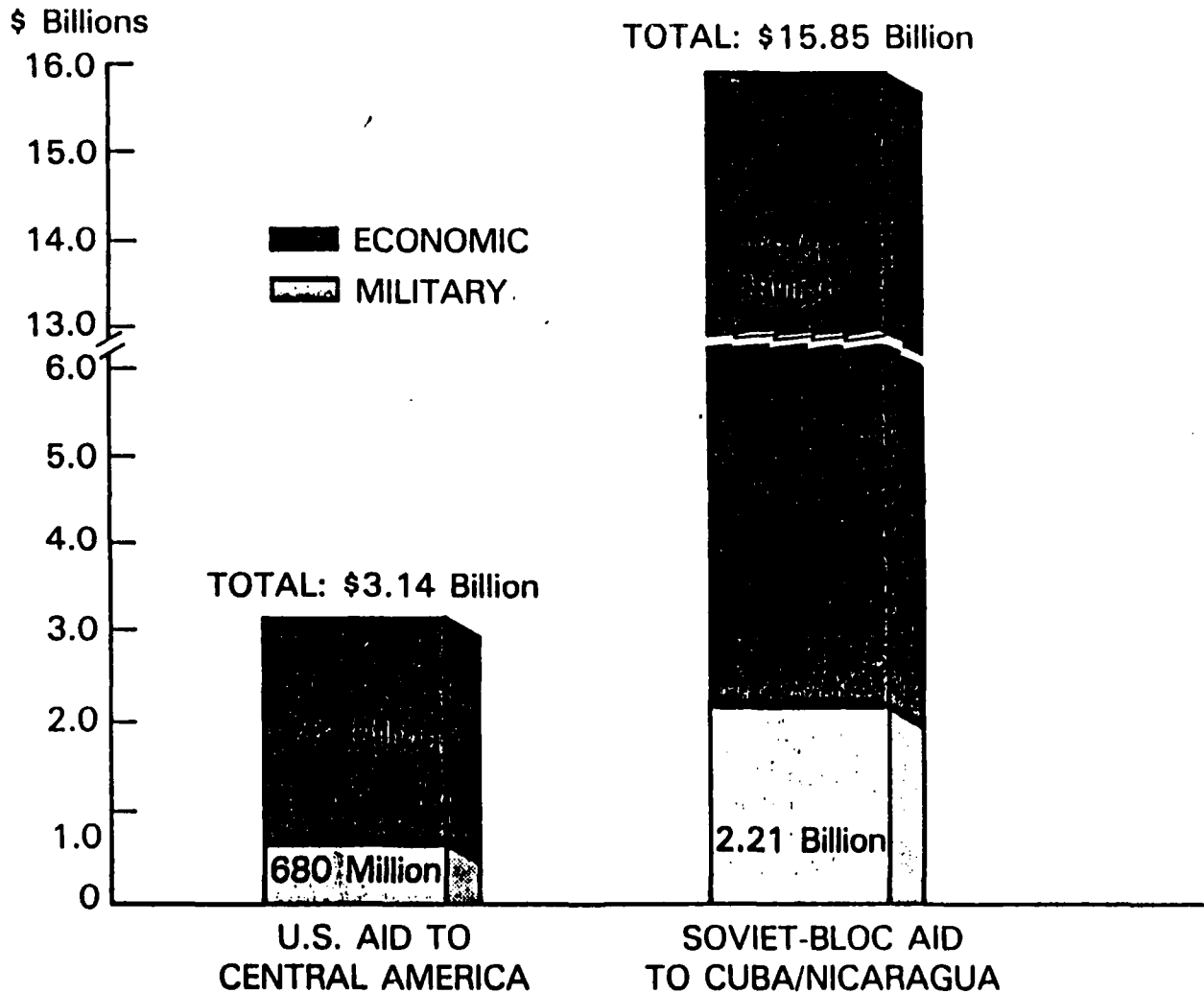
COUNTRY	% OF TOTAL TO U.S.
Costa Rica	47% (1983)
El Salvador	33% (1983)
Guatemala	35% (1985)
Honduras	54% (1983)
Nicaragua	13% (1984)
Panama	59% (1984)

Source: The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency,  
Washington, D.C., June 1986.

APPENDIX VIII

U.S./SOVIET ECONOMIC/MILITARY REGIONAL AID 1983-85

**ECONOMIC/MILITARY REGIONAL AID**  
**The U.S. and the Soviet-Bloc in 1983-85**

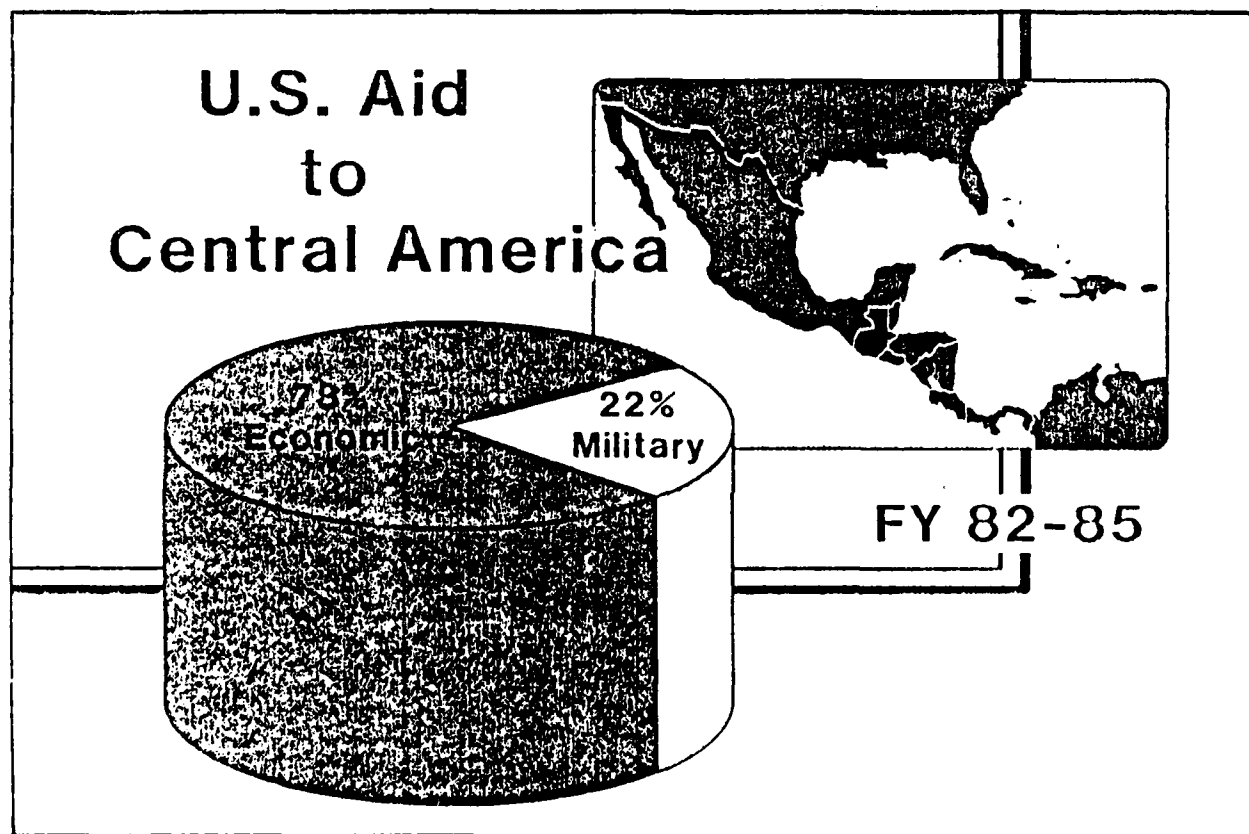


**Note: U.S. Aid Figures Include Belize & Panama.**

**Source:** Soviet Activities in Latin America and the Caribbean. Department of State. Washington D.C., 28 February 1985.

APPENDIX IX

U.S. AID TO CENTRAL AMERICA



Source: Soviet Activities in Latin America and the Caribbean. Department of State. Washington D.C., February 1985.



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